

Tu Bishvat/Parashat Beshallach/Shabbat Shira:

Rabbi Lisa Edwards, Jan. 22, 2000

I'm going to tell you a midrash, and then ask you to explain it. I'm sure we'll get several different explanations. Here's the midrash (I know some of you have heard it before. It's one of my favorites).

So important is the planting of trees, says the midrash, that if it should happen that you are about to plant a sapling and, just then, the messiah arrives, finish planting the tree and then go and greet the messiah.

[paraphrases of some of the responses]:

1. don't go running off every time you hear a messiah is coming.
2. when you have a sapling in your hand, no matter what else is happening, you are responsible for the welfare of that sapling, responsible for that young life.
3. Don't think that the messianic era, by definition, implies that everything will be taken care of for us. Even after the messiah arrives, we will have responsibilities in this world. We will be expected to act, to do things for ourselves and for the world.
4. don't be so quick to think it's the messiah just because someone says so.
5. planting a tree could help bring the messiah.
6. try to be doing something so precious/compelling at any given moment of your life, that you won't be wanting/willing to give it up even if the messiah arrives.

"Somebody" in Jewish tradition said, even in the messianic age, we will be called upon to be God's partners in the propagation of growing things, to take part in the growth and preservation of all life on earth.

Every day in traditional prayers, we remind ourselves of the ultimate in God's redemption: bringing us out of Egypt, dividing the sea so that we could cross in safety and escape the Egyptian army. That event, as we noted earlier, actually occurs in this week's Torah portion. And also in this week's portion, God gives us manna [Ex. 16:13-36], [which, as you know, experts now believe . . . well, okay, I believe, was actually tofu]. Here is how the manna is described in Torah: "in the morning there was a fall of dew about the camp. When the fall of dew lifted, there, over the surface of the wilderness, lay a fine and flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, 'Mahn hu?'" (notice how mahn-hu rhymes with "toe-fu"). "Mahn hu?" can perhaps best be translated as "what the heck is that?" which, of course is the question everyone asks when they behold tofu for the first time or manna, for that matter.

Our teachers tell us that the reason God didn't drop the manna directly onto our plates, the reason the manna had to be gathered, is because everyone must do their share. Everyone must make an effort. And do you know what happened when everyone made the effort? "The Israelites gathered [the manna], some gathered much, some little. But when they measured it [by the omer], the one who had gathered much had no excess, and the one who had gathered little had no deficiency: they had gathered as much as they needed to eat." [Ex. 16:17-18] It took humans to do something first, and then God made their action into a miracle: into the miracle that each person had exactly the right amount of food to eat.

Similarly when the Israelites stood at the shore of the sea, with the Egyptians behind them and unparted waters in front of them, the Israelites cry out to God and complain to Moses. Don't worry, says Moses, "Stand by and watch God deliver you . . . God will battle for you, you be silent." But God will have none of this--"why do you cry out to Me?" God says to Moses, "Tell the Israelites to go forward. And, you [Moses], lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground." [Ex. 14:11-16] God certainly plays a significant role; but by no means will God permit the Israelites to just stand there, nor even simply stand there and pray. "Go forward!" says God. The Israelites have to go forward into the unknown, before God will turn the unknown into a miracle.

The Israelites have to collect as much manna as they can -- that requires effort; the Israelites have to begin walking into the sea -- that requires faith and action; we have to plant the saplings before the trees will grow and before the messiah will arrive. It requires commitment on our part, a demonstrated willingness to do our part, before God will include us in a miracle.

So perhaps once upon a future time, maybe on a Tu Bishvat, maybe not, when, as it happens, we're all engaged at the same moment in some life-giving or life-preserving or life-saving task like planting a tree or gathering manna or walking into an as-yet-unparted sea, perhaps we'll each look up - momentarily distracted by the appearance of a fine and flaky substance falling over the face of the earth. "Mahn hu?" we'll all ask at the same time. "What the heck is that?" And the answer will come drifting down in a gentle voice from the heavens: "It's tofu! no, I mean, it's the arrival of the messianic era. Go back now, each of you, to the task at hand, you're doing such a good job that all of us together have brought us to this moment.

" Let us bless the flow of life that revives us, sustains us, and brings us to this moment." Nevarech et ma-yan khayenu shehekheyanu v'kiy'manu v'higianu laz'man hazeh [Marcia Falk] Shabbat shalom, chag sameach